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## AMATEUR PLAY-PRODUCING IN WAR TIME

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Whatever we may think of the conduct of the German government during the present conflict,<sup>1</sup> we must credit them with foresight in providing for keeping open all theaters, concert-halls, and other places of entertainment. Not only were the theaters permitted to contribute as before, but they were encouraged and enabled by the State to reduce the price of tickets. Actors played for half their usual salaries, and singers sang for the good of the cause. The Germans realized that in time of war the populace was in especial need of relaxation and recreation, and knew that one of the most potent agents in keeping the civil populace in order was entertainment. The result was that, during at least the first two and one-half years of the war, Germany enjoyed fully as many theatrical productions as in time of peace. It is now difficult to ascertain the state of the theater in Germany, but I venture to say that all the actors who are not in the trenches are playing.

The 10 per cent war tax was levied with the best of intentions and undoubtedly will succeed in raising funds which must be raised. It is of course right to tax what is a luxury compared with bread and sugar, but the professional drama, important as it is, is not all our drama, for there are thousands of schools and clubs from San Francisco to New York which are not affected by the war tax and whose duty becomes doubly heavy in supplying the community with good plays, thereby keeping up the necessary balance of sanity and health of mind in the community. The amateur has long enough been regarded merely as a joke; he has a new responsibility, and he will not fail to live up to it if he is but shown how to do so.

It is the purpose of this paper to point out what the amateur can do and how he can do it easily and without great expense. The

<sup>1</sup> This article was sent to the printer before the armistice was signed.

following suggestions are made with a view to assisting and encouraging amateurs in their attempt to do their bit while others are doing much more than their bit.

As to the choice of play, that depends entirely upon the individual group desiring to produce. For obvious reasons it is impossible to give a list of suitable plays for a patriotic entertainment, but the author will be glad to furnish a small list upon application. The play once chosen, there comes the problem of selecting of the cast. Long experience proves that the try-out system is the most satisfactory. Each contestant reads or recites a speech or two from the part he wishes to play, before two or three judges, who select the actor according to his stage presence and ability to interpret the rôle. The cast thus selected is then assembled, and the coach, or manager, reads the entire play to them and gives them a general idea of the way in which he intends it should be interpreted.

Rehearsing is the next step, and it is a step whose importance cannot be overestimated, for it is during the three or four weeks of strenuous work occupied in whipping the work into shape that many amateur companies come to grief. There must be first of all a militaristic, dominating head—the coach—whose duty it is to see that every move, every speech, every line, every bit of “business,” is executed according to his preconceived idea. He may, of course, interpolate new business later on and change a scene here and there, possibly accepting suggestions from the outside, but the whole must bear the imprint of his personality. To this end, therefore, every actor must place himself unconditionally in the hands of the coach, trusting him implicitly. Only by the strictest discipline is a play ever rehearsed and successfully played. So far as possible every rehearsal should be held upon the stage where the production is to take place, in order to accustom the actors to the surroundings, furniture, etc.

The first three or four rehearsals must be devoted to blocking out the business and acquainting the actors with their positions, crosses, entrances, exits, etc. The lines should be read at the same time, in order that the actor may associate them with action and business. The learning of lines without the accompanying action

is likely to cause great difficulty later on. The moment the cast are fairly familiar with lines and business and the general trend of the physical action, the coach may proceed to details. If the play is in more than one act, he takes the first act and goes through it from beginning to end, with as few interruptions as possible, say a dozen times. Meanwhile the actors are learning their lines. A week after starting this work they should have their first-act lines by heart, that is, be "letter-perfect." The second act is dealt with similarly, though it will be wise to rehearse the first one two or three times during the process. And likewise with the remaining acts. The final week or ten days must be devoted to going through the entire play and finishing the production.

A few words here on certain questions that arise in connection with rehearsing may not be amiss. A few weeks ago I was asked to make out in maxim form a brief set of directions for amateurs. Among these were the following:

1. Have a good coach. If possible, not an old actor; they are usually too conventional. Get one with some professional experience. Some amateur coaches, however, are sufficiently versed in the elementary tricks of the trade to keep the production from being too amateurish, in the bad sense. Work with the coach, and consider him an absolute master. Co-operation with, and subordination to, the coach mean much.

2. Don't try to imitate professional actors. Think of your characters in terms of life, not of the stage. No amateur ought to try to become like a professional. If he wishes to act for a living, let him go on the stage, and leave amateur acting to the amateurs.

3. No matter in what capacity you serve—whether as actor, assistant stage-manager, property man, or publicity man—work with the others, under the head. Never try to get into the spotlight (which, by the way, must be sparingly used), otherwise you will risk ruining everything.

4. Try not to use the old-fashioned sets. They are not bad because they are old-fashioned, but because they are, on the whole, ugly, absurd, and useless. Be simple. Remember that three or four screens, five dollars' worth of burlap or cheesecloth, and a little judgment and taste can produce something more beautiful and pleasing than a \$50,000 set.

5. Be sparing of your lights. As a rule you will not require footlights or spots. Try to use reflectors from the wings, or central lighting from the loft. Lighting is a difficult art, but experimenting will do wonders.

6. Don't worry about make-up, and don't use much. If your characters are all "straight" parts, you can easily find someone who can put on a little

rouge, a few lines, and powder. If you have "character" parts—old men with beards, old women, and the like—you had better employ a professional make-up man. In any event use only enough make-up to prevent your looking pale.

So much for rehearsing. This is largely a matter of experience—the coach's experience. The best rule is to secure a good coach and keep in his good graces.

Of recent years great progress has been made in the matter of stage settings. There is little cause nowadays for amateurs to complain of the cost of settings. There are very few plays which cannot be adequately and even beautifully mounted for from ten to fifty dollars, and, after the preliminary equipment is purchased, for from five to fifteen dollars, exclusive of the coach's salary, and royalties on the play, if there are any. There is no need to rent an expensive and ugly old-fashioned "box-set" made of wood and painted canvas; nowadays we have ready to hand settings of a simple character which are vastly more serviceable, beautiful, and appropriate than the elaborate contrivances of our forefathers.

Upon practically any stage or platform, in any theater and in almost any room, can be constructed a simple sort of cyclorama. The cyclorama in its simplest form is a half-cylinder extending from the stage to the ceiling and facing the audience. It is often made of white plaster, but is most practicable for amateurs as a series of heavy curtains, screening the back of the stage, and extending all the way across. These curtains, made in long strips two yards wide, are hung from curved rods of iron or wood, and put close together so that the whole presents the appearance of a single piece of material. The spaces left between the two-yard strips, not seen, of course, unless they are held open, are used for entrances. These curtains may be made of burlap or similar goods, brown, red, or green in color. It is best to make two thicknesses, with red material, for instance, on one side, and green on the other, so that two backgrounds may be used with the same curtains merely by reversing them. The cyclorama is used constantly, in and by itself in exteriors, and as a general background for interiors. Such a curtain, costing anywhere from fifteen to fifty dollars, depending on the size and the material, may be used for almost any sort of out-of-door play, suggesting as it does, with the aid of the simplest

accessories, a garden, a forest, or the like. Shakespeare, especially, is susceptible of the most decorative presentation with nothing but a simple background of this sort. Nothing could be more appropriate, for instance, for the forest scenes in "As You Like It" and the garden scenes in "Twelfth Night." A log or two in the former, for set-pieces, a few box or bay trees set in green tubs, and two benches in the latter play are all the scenery required. Or take a modern play. Rostand's "The Romancers" has long enjoyed great popularity with professionals and amateurs alike. The stage directions call for the following setting: "The stage is divided by an old wall, covered with vines and flowers. At the right a corner of Bergamin's private park is seen; at the left, a corner of Pasquiot's. On each side of the wall, and against it, is a rustic bench." The scene represents two formal gardens, or parks. The conventional stage settings would consist ordinarily of cut-out scenery and set-pieces, costing perhaps a hundred dollars. With the improvised cyclorama described above, it would be necessary to furnish only the wall, a necessity in any case; this would consist of a painted wooden structure about seven feet high and ten feet long. Two or three rustic benches and a few bay trees will complete the set. The cyclorama is, of course, green.

So far we have considered only out-of-door settings. What of interiors? Let us begin by admitting that there are some few plays which require an interior of such intricacy that only a made-to-order box-set would do. But by far the greater number of plays produced by amateurs can be set at comparatively small expense and with little trouble in the following manner.

Four simple screens, arranged in any way desired, will suffice for almost any interior. These are made in three sections, with reversible hinges. Each screen is about seven feet high, the width of each section being about two and a half feet. The framework should be of oak or some other solid wood, able to bear the strain of continual use. Burlap of dark red, or green, or tan is tacked to the framework, one color on each side. Three screens will usually suffice, but it is well to have an extra one in case a more elaborate set is required. Three screens may be easily set to represent a conventional interior. The screens on each side are the walls of

the room, the one at the back above the opening left for the entrance screens the back of the stage, which is the cyclorama. Spaces may be left on either side, below the left- and right-hand screens, for additional entrances. It will be found that a few articles of furniture, two or three pictures, and a few ornaments will supply the requisite atmosphere. A hallway, a courtyard, a king's throne-room, or a peasant's hut can all be suggested by a judicious arrangement of three or four screens. It cannot be too strongly urged that suggestion, and not representation, is the keystone to all art, and that the art of stage-setting is subject to the same principles as any other.

It is out of the question even to suggest the many possible combinations of settings to be obtained from the two simple methods above outlined. It may safely be asserted that any intelligent and diligent company of amateurs can by a little experimenting invent new sets and discover many ways of turning simple screens into sets of distinction and beauty.

More perhaps than anything else has stage-lighting occupied the attention of stage artists during the past decade or two. In general, amateur producers are advised to be more sparing of their lights. This means, first of all, reducing the footlights to a minimum or doing without them entirely; footlights cast an unnatural glare on actors and scenery. Try to make the light come from one direction only. Perhaps this will be from above, where a large and powerful lamp can easily be installed; or, better still, from the wings, or immediately behind, and about halfway up, the proscenium arches. Striking and beautiful effects have been secured by placing a 50-candle-power lamp on either side of the stage, with some sort of reflector behind it. This will flood the stage with a mellow and luminous light. A moderate use of strip-lights from the stage-floor or from the inside of the proscenium arches is to be commended. Also a flood-light from the back of the "house," or auditorium, may be used for certain effects or may be added to the stage-lighting as just described. On the whole it is better to have suffused lighting of this sort than the old lighting whereby the actors are forced to use more grease paint than is really needed.

The whole art of setting stages, whether they be in theaters, concert-halls, or private rooms, requires experimentation. Still, with the improvised cyclorama and the four screens, amateurs with little or no technical experience will discover surprisingly novel effects produced by these simple means.

Amateurs are at last becoming aware that they fill a place in our national life, a place not filled by the commercial theaters; and during the present war they are realizing that they are not only the means of entertaining themselves, their parents, and their friends, but that they constitute factors in the community. No matter how feeble their efforts, provided they are sincere, they go to make up the grand total of what is best in our national well-being.